

Secret Food Confessions (Holiday Edition)

By *MostlyMartha* on November 20, 2006 2:45 PM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(9\)](#) | [TrackBacks \(0\)](#)

I'm halfway done with two other posts, but am just too scatterbrained the last few days to finish them coherently. Instead, I'll confess some of the strange, perhaps even distasteful holiday foods to which I am secretly devoted. I got to thinking about the subject while planning my Thanksgiving menu. Every year, the holiday season causes some of my funny obsessions to rear their embarrassing heads. What are these dishes of shame, these celebratory foodstuffs I anticipate each year?

Well, for one, Ocean Spray jellied cranberry sauce. I adore that wiggly, ridged log of delightful sweet-tartness. I'm fond of cranberries generally, particularly in more respectable preparations, but that blue and white can holds a special place in my heart for reasons that go deeper than nostalgia. For one, the rich, butter-laden holiday plate needs a bright flavor note just to keep the palate awake. Of course, a well-made whole berry sauce can fill that role as well, but there's just something about that jelly texture that enthalls me. And of course, the whole point of cooking a turkey is to have leftover turkey sandwiches. My mom and I prefer ours on whole-grain bread with spicy honey mustard, a layer of cornbread dressing, and a thick slab of gelatinous cranberry goodness.

Even more humiliating, I love green bean casserole. Yes, the kind with the cream of mushroom soup and French's French-fried onions. Lord knows why I learned to make béchamel specifically to use it instead of Campbell's cream of what ever in those kinds of old-fashioned recipes, and yet, I can't bring myself to tart up green bean casserole. It tastes perfect already, soft and creamy and salty, laden with those addictive crispy onion bits. Actually, those may be the secret of my devotion to green bean casserole. I have to buy the big can when I make it so I have plenty to munch on. They look funny, the coat the roof of your mouth, and yet, as I write this, I've developed a craving so intense my stomach just rumbled a little. I don't have the excuse of nostalgia on this one either. Since basically everyone in the world but me things this stuff is gross, I didn't really grow up with it. My grandmother makes it now, but I don't know that anyone but me eats it.

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Beet season

By *MostlyMartha* on November 13, 2006 6:06 PM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#) | [TrackBacks \(0\)](#)



I enjoy these cool, drippy days when the winter rains finally come to the Bay Area; they give an illusion of changing seasons rare in our temperate climate. It's nice to put on my pumpkin-colored raincoat and tweed cap for the first time in months and head out to buy a new umbrella. It rains so infrequently during spring, summer, and early autumn, I invariably forget where I stored the previous season's umbrella and must replace it. I suspect that one day I'll open the right drawer or closet and find a mother load of previous season's parapluies.

While I'm out umbrella shopping, I'm also likely to pick up a few bunches of beets. For as much as I love eating adorable baby beets in the spring, I like them even better in the chilly days of autumn. The smell of damp earth and caramelized sugar while they roast seems to warm me from the inside. Plus, what better to counteract a damp, gray day than an intense infusion of beet pink?

Although I know it's possible to think of the pink as something of a menace, an infectious hue that must be segregated from all other foods until the last possible minute, I love that the color looks almost too intense to eat. That such a bright hue accompanies such rich, almost dirt-like taste always surprises me. Many of my favorite beet

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dishes take advantage of the pink, letting it bleed freely into the dish, and ensuring a truly dramatic presentation on the plate.

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And another thing

By MostlyMartha on November 6, 2006 10:18 AM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(1\)](#) | [TrackBacks \(0\)](#)

Tejal pointed out to me that, in my gushing about New York in general and wd-50 in specific, I forgot to mention a particular neat aspect of the timing of our dinner. We happened to dine just days after Alex Stupak, best known for, until recently, being the pastry chef Alinea in Chicago, started at wd-50. He was even in the kitchen on that quiet Sunday night, and from my seat I had a wonderfully discrete angle from which to watch him work.

Tejal said a few "trademark" items and techniques were familiar to her from Alinea, and we certainly had the opportunity to taste a wide range of his work. In addition to the pre-dessert and two desserts on the tasting menu, he sent out a third dessert to each of us, and a wonderfully bitter little chocolate birthday cake for me. That element of bitterness, or at least lack of intense sweetness, was present in all of his desserts. He also made wide use of other intense flavor notes like licorice, menthol, and chartreuse. Nothing was savory, but neither was anything so sweet that it dulled the tongue. Depending on what elements you got on the spoon, each bite would let one flavor pop while the others harmonized in the background.

It should probably not surprise you to learn that a few jean buttons were discretely undone in the taxi on the way back to Whitney's place. We'd only saved room for the two desserts we were expecting, but the sacrifice of a very full tummy was gladly undertaken.

It's also worth noting that Wylie was in the restaurant that evening, having a casual dinner. It's always nice to see chefs actually eating in their own restaurants, chefs who are involved in the experience, instead of just designing a menu and disappearing into the mist.

Insert obligatory "Big Apple" joke here

By MostlyMartha on October 31, 2006 11:50 AM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(6\)](#) | [TrackBacks \(0\)](#)



I could say I went to New York because Stephen and my mom sent me there to celebrate my birthday. I could say I went to spend some quality dress-oogling time with the ladies who will, in the not to distant future, be in my wedding party. I could even say I went in hopes that a bout of jetsetting would snap me out of my prolonged period of useless moping. While all these things are technically true, the real reason I made the trek was to eat.

If you're the sort of person who travels on her stomach, you could hardly do better than five days in New York with Whitney and Tejal. There are few people in the world more enthusiastic about a rigorous schedule of cocktails, dinners, further cocktails, and midnight snacks than those two.

We kicked off Star Chefs Rising Stars Revue, a pretty fantastic to-do hosted by the people at Tejal's [new job](#) (which I think she'll talk more about later). I put on red lipstick and dangly earrings, then Whitney and I up met up with Tejal at an enormous club called Crobar.



The theme was "high-concept street food," meaning we strolled from cart to cart with our ever-refilled wine glass, sampling bites from exciting young chefs like [Franklin Becker](#), [Paul Liebrandt](#), [Zakary Pelaccio](#), [Tony Liu](#), and [Will Goldfarb](#).

About every five minutes, someone would ask, "Have you tried the foie gras hot dog? It's awesome!" I did; it was indeed awesome, as was the tuna sashimi with wasabi ice and sweet soy reduction. The latter wasn't the most literal example of "street food," but the sweet, icy burn had eyes rolling in pleasure all over the room nonetheless.

We continued on to the after party at Bed. In route we were soundly hooted at by two guys driving a garbage truck. Which is every bit as flattering as it sounds. At Bed we partied like rock stars and learned two very important lessons. One: everyone looks sexier lounging on cushions.



Once we spied people passionately smooching, we learned lesson number two: it's better not to think about what you might see staining those cushions if the lights were on.

Continue reading [Insert obligatory "Big Apple" joke here.](#)

It's all right

By MostlyMartha on October 25, 2006 2:48 PM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(10\)](#) | [TrackBacks \(0\)](#)

Ten weeks ago I got a once in a lifetime invitation to eat my way around Southeast Asia in the company of the most extraordinary person. It's amazing, really, how it all came about. See, I was on the plane coming home from Nashville, and you'll never guess who was sitting in the seat next to me!

Okay, not so much. That would be a much better excuse for my absence than the truth. The truth is that my real life, the life I live outside of this cozy cyber nest where my biggest concern is whether or not the yeast will bloom in warm water, kicked my butt recently. For a variety of icky, personal reasons I spent the last few days, weeks, months, forevers (it seems) moderately depressed and basically useless. I couldn't bring myself to post here pretending to be witty and sunny, pretending everything was fine. I also couldn't bear to post the truth. Day after day of "Didn't get out of bed today. Ate nine fun-size Kit-Kats. Ordered Chinese again," hardly seemed worth it. At a certain point, the fact that I wasn't posting began to feel like a failure in and of itself, one more reason not to get out of my pajamas.

Thankfully, the worst seems to be over. The gears seem to be turning again. I'm cooking, nothing worth noting, but it's nice to feel like I'm finding my feet.

I thought about turning up here again, apologizing in passing for my time away, and continuing without further comment. When you live part of your life on the internet, there's always the question of how much of yourself to reveal. It's more fun to show the cocktails and nibbles part of me than the unwashed hair, red-rimmed eyes, and pizza delivery part. In the end, I decided to address it largely because I kept getting e-mails from people wondering where I was, if I was okay, and whether or not I'd been eaten by a bear or something. At the time, I didn't really know what to say to those people (Hi Sean! Hi Payal! Hi Whitney!), but it made me think that something did need to be said.

Some years ago, Stephen gave me an acoustic cover of "Here Comes the Sun" by a folk singer named Richie Havens. The first time I heard his version, I realized it was actually a rather sad song. When George Harrison sings it, it sounds like everything bad is in the past. Richie Havens sings like all his troubles are very much in the present. He sings with a desperate hopefulness, like he believes, must believe, that he's finally seeing a sign that everything will eventually be better. He says, "I feel that ice is slowly melting;" I think I know what he means.

Dinner, way uptown

By T on September 13, 2006 11:28 AM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(8\)](#) | [TrackBacks \(0\)](#)



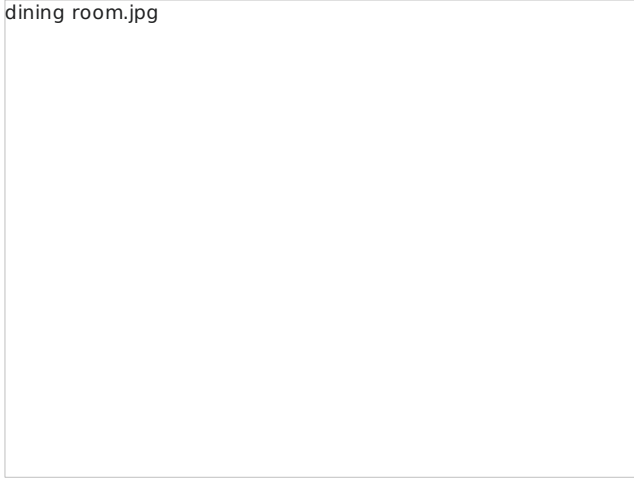
An Indian in the cupboard...

By T on September 10, 2006 11:23 AM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(3\)](#) | [TrackBacks \(0\)](#)



El Bulli pictures

By T on August 28, 2006 11:34 PM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(14\)](#) | [TrackBacks \(0\)](#)



This is the first meal I've ever documented this way. First reason, obviously, it's El Bulli man. Second reason, it's my birthday weekend extravaganza in Barcelona with Glyn and he's given me a pretty sweet little camera. A couple are blurry, dark, or too close because I was fooling around with all the exciting, new buttons. Oh, but they're not all bad...

Continue reading [El Bulli pictures.](#)

El Boo-yee

By T on August 27, 2006 7:30 PM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(2\)](#) | [TrackBacks \(0\)](#)



Imagine it in Spanish: it's evening in Roses, and the French (because *everyone* here is French) are walking their tiny, well groomed dogs and plying their whingy kids with ice-cream cones. Outside the decent, but rather shabby Hotel Marina, is a taxi stand:

"Good evening! We're going to El Bulli, do you know where that is?" I ask.

"El Bulli? Ah, well, it's my first day actually.." The driver makes a quick and lispy phone call during which he is obviously being given directions. "Oh-ho! You meant El Boo-yee" He says, folding up his phone. And we begin the ten minute drive up that winding, narrow road along the ocean. It's beautiful here, but more importantly, you don't pronounce those */s* in El Bulli--two *l*'s make a *y*. Because it's Spanish, after all. And despite the French occupation of Roses, this is Spain. And not just Spain, but *Catalunya*, the graffittied ruins that whizz past remind me, and *the revolution is coming*.

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Popsicle of the gods

By MostlyMartha on August 9, 2006 4:00 PM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(3\)](#) | [TrackBacks \(0\)](#)



This certainly isn't a newsflash, but all Mexican food is not created equal. I mean, of course the Chevy's I've occasionally resorted to is an inevitable disappointment, but even what passes for reasonably respectable Mexican food in a lot of places can be pretty horrific. Boston, in my experience, has terrible Mexican food. I spent four years there essentially twitching in desperation for something resembling a decent taco. In our freshman year, Stephen and I went to a restaurant that came very highly recommended. They actually managed to make a quesadilla nearly inedible. We went back one other time, hoping we'd just been on a bad day, but the food did not improve.

The problem, of course, is that cities without many visible Mexican people rarely have excellent Mexican food. Forty years after the race riots in Roxbury, Boston is still a surprisingly white city. In addition to the problematic social and cultural implications, this means the odds of getting decent guacamole are pretty slim.

The Nashville of my earliest years was a similar city. Back in the years before salsa was the best-selling condiment in America, my understanding of Mexican cuisine went no farther than Chi-Chi's, and it went there infrequently. When my mother was pregnant with me, a friend of hers was the manager of a Chi-Chi's, and he treated her to an all-she-could-eat pseudo-Mexican feast. The hours she later spent throwing up put her off the idea for some time.

Over time, that aspect of Nashville's culinary landscape broadened. Slowly at first, immigrants arrived, and the food in the Music City changed for the better. I know a lot of people there who have some militantly angry feelings about immigration in general. Many of them are the same people who have forgotten a time when they didn't even know what cilantro was, let alone whether or not they thought it tasted like soap. I, for one, am nothing but enthusiastic about this recent cultural shift.

Continue reading [Popsicle of the gods](#).
